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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1320
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000328

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [UNSC](#) [ER](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: UN SPECIAL ENVOY MEETS WITH ERITREAN PRESIDENT
ISAIAS

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR SCOTT H. DELISI, FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) UN Special Envoy for Sudan Jan Eliasson and UN Mission in Sudan Principal Deputy Special Representative Taye-Brook Zerihoun, met with Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) President Isaias Afwerki on March 22. Subsequent to his meeting, Eliasson spoke with the Ambassador, relaying both the positive tone of Eliasson's meeting with Isaias and Isaias's professed support for keeping the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) as the basis for next steps. Isaias also seemed surprisingly at ease with the idea of African Union (AU) involvement in the Sudan peace process despite Eritrea's acrimonious relationship with the AU overall. Despite the positive tone, however, the extent to which the GSE would actively support the UN-AU process in Sudan, and the next steps with the GSE (other than information sharing), remained unclear; while Isaias focused on the need for a comprehensive and inclusive solution for Sudan with strong emphasis on development, he also questioned the politics of the international community on Darfur, the extent of the humanitarian crisis and genocide, and he challenged the West's call for sanctions.

¶2. (C) Eliasson characterized the meeting as a confidence-building exercise and voiced his satisfaction with Isaias' willingness and openness to discussion on Darfur and his encouragement to Eliasson to "keep in touch." Isaias also told Eliasson he was willing to cooperate with the UN on Sudan. According to Eliasson, although Isaias saw benefit in including the AU in the process, he observed that the AU role will be difficult to sell to the non-signatories, particularly the National Redemption Front. Eliasson, who sees his charge as advancing both peace-keeping and the political process in Sudan, hopes to merge the parallel UN-AU initiatives and the Libya-Chad-Eritrea-Sudan initiative. Eliasson observed that while he shared Isaias' view that a comprehensive approach was required, he was worried by the GSE's apparent lack of urgency. He noted that Isaias seemed to see this as a process unfolding over the next few years, while Eliasson's own time frame is measured in months.

13. (C) The Ambassador noted that the GSE is adjusting strategy following the setback in their efforts to help create an anti-Ethiopian Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) government in Somalia. As a result, they have struck a very different tone with recent visitors from the EU and elsewhere. While noting to Eliasson that Isaias' seemingly collegial and constructive engagement was a welcome development, Ambassador cautioned that we would look to their actions, rather than their words on this, and other issues. The Ambassador observed that up to now, the GSE has wanted to be involved in Sudan, but only playing by their own rules. Noting that we continue to see indications that the GSE has been working, along with Sudan, to push forward with an Eritrean-led mediation while trying seemingly to derail the UN-AU effort, the Ambassador questioned whether the GSE would really be willing to work within an international framework. He encouraged Eliasson to keep making the effort to involve Eritrea along with other regional actors but be prepared for the GSE balking when the time for true engagement comes.

14. (C) Eliasson, on his part, acknowledged the challenges with the GSE but said he hoped he will be given the "space" to make diplomacy work. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG would welcome the Eritreans playing a constructive role within a UN-AU process - though not as leaders of a separate mediation process. He also cautioned that Eritrea could, through its actions on Somalia or as a result of its continued hostility towards the U.S., create an environment which would make it difficult for us to work with them on Sudan in any role. Eliasson acknowledged that the Eritreans could ultimately isolate themselves but welcomed our willingness to entertain a possible role for them at present despite our bilateral differences and concerns about the GSE's actions in the region. He said he hoped that the GSE

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realized it had gone too far in isolating itself already and would take to heart admonitions from Norway that it must improve its ties to the USG through specific actions. The Ambassador said he shared Eliasson's hopes but that after almost six weeks, the Norwegians had still to receive an answer from the GSE on those points and that there had been no change on the ground in terms of Eritrean restrictions on U.S. Mission operations.

15. (C) Comment: Eliasson came to Eritrea in response to a personal invitation from President Isaias. The warm reception he received has encouraged him to continue his efforts and we hope he meets a degree of success - although we remain skeptical about the GSE's willingness to work within any process in which they do not have a pre-eminent role. Interestingly, even as the GSE maintains its restrictions on the U.S. Embassy here and continues its often outrageous rhetorical attacks on the USG, they seem to be making every effort to signal the EU, Norway, and now Eliasson, that they want to reduce their international isolation. Our belief is that the GSE, in engaging with Sudan, the CIC, and perhaps Iran, finds value in being able to cast the USG as the "enemy" and it is in no hurry, despite Norwegian admonitions, to ease tensions with us. At the same time, if by holding out the promise of engagement to the Europeans, they can split the ranks of the international community, they will do so. The session with Eliasson appears to be a continuation of the GSE's efforts to show their "reasonable face" to the world. Talk is cheap, however, and the Eritreans know that it costs them nothing to sound a more moderate tone if it gets them a place at the table on Sudan and Somalia; diminishes pressure on issues such as human rights; and causes the EU and others to set aside concerns over their destabilizing role in the region. We will continue to remind the EU and Norway of the point we made to Eliasson--by all means be willing to engage the GSE if they truly are sincere, but measure that sincerity by their actions, not their words. End Comment.

Minimize considered.
DeLisi